

DUXBURY HISTORY FILE
REFERENCE

Independent bookstores face new challenge

Internet sellers fight for market

By CHRIS WALKER
The Patriot Ledger

When Hingham Bookport owner Fran Aronovici heard about the impending closing of Norwell's Book & Brew, her feelings weren't hard to describe.

"I felt sick," she said. "Every time I see an independent bookstore closing I get sick because we're already such a small percentage of the industry. I see it as a way of life disappearing."

Citing the domination of superstores such as Barnes & Noble and the emergence of online bookseller Amazon.com, Book & Brew lost a battle almost all small, local bookstores are now fighting against Wall Street-backed bookselling giants. Last week, the Lauriat's bookstore chain also announced it is closing its stores.

Accounting for 33 percent of all book sales seven years ago, independent bookstores now represent about 17 percent of the market, according to Wayne Drugan, executive director of the New England Booksellers Association, which represents 500 stores in the region.

Drugan said the chain store boom has leveled off recently, and added that while the rise of the book superstore decimated independent booksellers in other parts of the country, New England stores were able to absorb much of the punch. Drugan said Lauriat's demise was more a result of long-

term problems than from any industry trends.

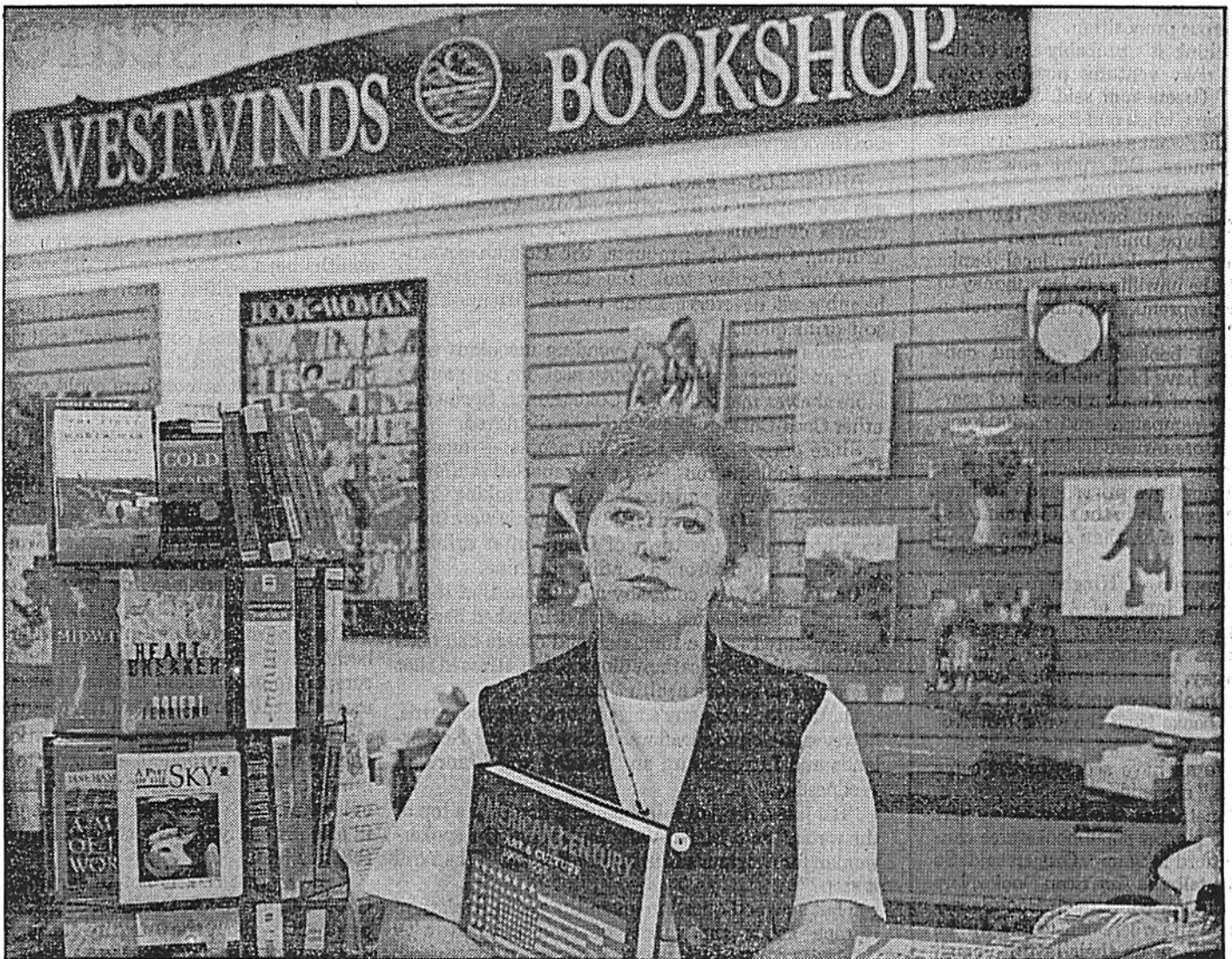
"It had more of an impact in other parts of the country, such as the South, where people are used to driving a distance to a certain destination," Drugan said. "New England has always been more supportive of the notion that business is local. It's that town meeting, town hall aspect that has really helped."

It is the same sense of community that independent booksellers around the South Shore said they hope will help them survive the latest and most serious threat to their business — the Internet.

"In such a fast-paced world that we have today, we better hold on to every piece of community we possibly can," said Pam Giovannini, who owns the Front Street Book Shop in Scituate.

Although wary of the Internet's potential, booksellers said the Web cannot duplicate the personal relationships small booksellers develop with customers, a characteristic they said must be highlighted and improved for them to stay competitive.

"The ability to come into a local bookstore and see what the world has to offer is a unique situation," said Cecilia Greenbaum, owner of the Westwinds



TOM TAJIMA/The Patriot Ledger

Because of large bookstore chains and Internet book sites, Duxbury, says opening a small bookstore is "probably one of the most risky ventures possible right now." Cecilia Greenbaum, owner of the Westwinds bookshop in

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bookshop in Duxbury. "If we don't support our community bookstores, all we're going to see in the future is what the mass market wants."

Heavily financed by Wall Street, Amazon.com has tried to lure customers away from traditional bookstores with promises of low prices and convenience. But despite the hype, Amazon has consistently lost money at a faster rate than its sales have grown, Drugan said, who added that online book sales account for only 2 percent of the total market.

Nonetheless, most booksellers admitted that Amazon, which allows consumers to buy books without leaving home and offers substantial discounts on best-sellers, has taken away at least some business. And most said starting a bookselling business in this climate would be a dangerous proposition.

"I think it's probably one of the most risky ventures possible right now," Greenbaum said. "Maybe in five years, when and if people realize that they want a local bookstore, that will change. But right now it's a terribly scary venture."

Drugan said because of the mass media hype billing Amazon as the

future of bookselling, local banks might be unwilling to loan money to an entrepreneur hoping to open a small bookstore.

Local booksellers contend consumers have been misled about the benefits of Amazon because of marketing campaigns and media hype. Bookstore owners insisted that they can offer the same selection of books, at competitive prices, and can have them available in the same amount of time, or faster, than Amazon promises.

Aronovici of Hingham Bookport cited the image of Amazon with a massive warehouse of books ready to ship as the biggest falacy in the industry. She said small bookstores, large bookstores and Amazon all get their books from the same distributors.

"We all have access to the same books," she said.

Nonetheless, the Internet is a part of the market small bookstores cannot afford to ignore, Drugan said. So in the fall, the American Booksellers Association will launch BookSense.com, a site where consumers will be able to look up their favorite small bookstore and buy books online.